

10 Ways to Nurture Learning in Preschoolers and Kindergarteners

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Ready to meet your child's first and most important teacher? Take a look in the mirror.

The everyday interaction you have with your child - from cuddling up and reading a book to learning to get dressed - is a major warm-up for school.

Throughout these important years, you have a unique opportunity to influence how your child sees himself as a learner. With your encouragement, he will naturally explore and experiment, take risks and gain a feeling of mastery. You are the role model who will teach your child how to tackle challenges, how to use reading and writing for learning and entertainment, and how to treat others.

Of all the periods of a child's life, the years between three and five are arguably the most critical in development. It's a time of wonder when skills grow by leaps and bounds each day. "My daughter constantly surprises me. Yesterday when I was reading her favorite book, I replaced a couple of the words, thinking they would be over her head. She corrected me, saying 'No, Mommy, the word is citizen, not person,'" laughs Beth Saralegui, mother of a three-year-old.

Here are 10 everyday ways to help your young child learn to succeed in school and in life:

1. **Provide a loving environment.** Your child's world should be a safe playground for growing and developing. Give him or her the gifts of childhood: innocence, wonder, excitement, and a home in which they feel secure, protected and loved. "Children feel the moods and emotions of their parents," says Sandra Rief, M.A., author of *Ready Start School: Nurturing and Guiding Your Child Through Preschool and Kindergarten*. "We should try our best to shelter our young children from stress, anxiety, and adult problems."
2. **Talk it up.** Children acquire vocabulary and language usage at an astonishing rate during the early childhood years. "Give them the words they need to succeed," says Renee Hughes, a preschool director with a master's degree in early childhood education. "It's the number one thing you can do to promote their language development. Explain what you're doing, whether you're changing a diaper, washing clothes, or making the bed. The more information they have, the better they can understand the world around them."
3. **Read, read, read.** Children who are read to on a regular basis become better readers, gain literacy skills more rapidly, and are more successful in school. A home environment that fosters literacy and a love of learning is one in which the children are surrounded by books, see their parents reading for pleasure and education, and associate reading and writing with comfort and joy- such as sitting in a parent's lap while being read a favorite book.

Take the benefits a step further by reading the story a couple of times and then asking your child to tell it back to you, suggests Hughes. "Ask open-ended questions and let them tell you the story. This fosters communications skills - which are at the core of everything they'll do in life."

4. **Pack in the playtime.** One of the biggest mistakes that parents make is to assume that preschool learning means academic learning such as ABCs, numbers, and addition. Nothing could be further from the truth. "Children learn best through playing," says Kathy Seal, co-author of *Motivated*

Minds: Raising Children to Love Learning. Playing, whether it's outdoor play or indoor games, allows your child to receive the individual attention he thrives on. And games and activities with parents and other kids develop gross and fine motor skills, language, cognitive thinking and reasoning abilities, and cooperative/social skills.

5. **Connect the dots.** The more children see connections between book learning and the real world, the more meaningful their schoolwork will be, and the more they will be interested in learning. By regularly providing a rich array of experiences - visits to the seashore, farmer's markets, concerts, plays, museums - you will broaden your child's knowledge of the world and nurture curiosity.
6. **Foster organization abilities and time awareness.** Start planting the seeds now for these skills, which are critical for success in school and throughout adulthood. Arrange your child's bedroom and playroom so that he knows where things belong when not in use, suggests Reif. Store toys in tubs or baskets so your child can reach them easily. Talk about time in ways a young child can understand. For instance: "We're going to leave at 4:00. That's when Mason comes home from school."
7. **Encourage interests and passions.** Help your child discover his passions by providing a variety of hands-on experiences: swimming, music, dance, bug collecting. "The more you encourage your child's own intellectual interests - whether for bugs, story writing, chemistry, or music - the more passion he will bring to related academics," notes Seal.
8. **Let them "fail."** Teach your children how to deal with negative situations by allowing them to fail at something, then encouraging them to find the solution to the problem. "Bake a cake with your child and deliberately leave out an ingredient," suggests Hughes. "Then bake it again the right way, and talk about why it didn't work the first time."
9. **Foster creativity.** Find an area in your house where your child can paint and do crafts without worrying about the mess. Then provide plenty of materials to write, draw, and create.
10. **Think emotional I.Q., not just academic.** Many gung-ho parents over-emphasize intellectual development and forget about the importance of building social skills at this age, according to Hughes. "You've got 12 years to work on your children's academic development, but if you don't teach the basic elements of good human behavior - following directions, taking turns, sharing - when they're young, they're never going to get them," she warns. "Your child may be a mathematical genius but if he can't get along with other people, it's not going to do him a darn bit of good."

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